

# Not Everything in Textbooks is True: teaching discourse analysis to undergraduate business students

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## **Not Everything in Textbooks is True: teaching discourse analysis to undergraduate business students**

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Coventry University adopted the United Nations' Principles for Responsible Management in 2007 and, more recently, the Business School has taken up the challenge to embed these important principles throughout their course offerings in order to provide the very best education for future business leaders. 'Managing Business Responsibly' is a final-year, undergraduate module which was created two years ago and which grew partly out of some of my previous teaching. This is an optional module that has students clamouring to sign up as it is one of the few that has no examination and is assessed wholly on coursework. They very quickly realise that it is not a soft option. The module poses a series of critical challenges to students and in the first few weeks many find it uncomfortable as the theories drawn upon are not those generally found within a business course. Students are encouraged to consider both their individual values and how these may or may not be reflected at a corporate level: What kind of manager do they ultimately want to be? And how do they become?

As an undergraduate I was inspired by the writings of E. F. Schumacher and the challenges posed to capitalism with his concepts of 'enoughness' and 'Buddhist Economics'. Around the same time I was also introduced to Paolo Freire's writings and twenty five years later I am still thinking about the implications of his discussions of the emancipatory potential of education and the dangers of education that purports to be neutral whilst perpetuating hidden political agendas. Since the financial crisis of 2007/8 along with all of the preceding business failures by Enron et al. there have been an increasing number of academics who have made a connection between the world of business and business teaching. They have pointed to a managerialist/neo-liberal ideology prevailing in business schools and a lack of ethics amongst both business students and business school academics. Whilst not all of these writers are drawing from empirical evidence, there are certainly strong and persuasive arguments that if you repeatedly teach from a particular frame of reference, such as neo-liberalism, it becomes very difficult to conceive of a world that is organised in any other way. For students educated within a narrow ideology this means that they potentially leave University armed with a limited range of language with which to, borrowing Freire's words, name the world.

Within the module students are invited to think of themselves as agents of change in the broadest sense and to carefully consider those aspects of their current or future organisations that they might be able to influence. The rational model of decision-making is held up for particular scrutiny and consideration is given to how it may effectively be supplemented by non-traditional methods. Social constructionist theory features in the first few weeks and conversation patterns, narratives,

discourses, and storytelling are all explored as potential tools for business students who aspire to become responsible managers.

Discourse analysis in particular has proven to be a useful and flexible means for encouraging students to critique the models and theories that they have been taught. In order to guard against plagiarism, and I possibly because I enjoy it, I literally rip several pages from a strategy textbook and present the scanned version to the students as the basis for their first assessed piece of work. Reactions to this assessment are quite often nervousness and uncertainty. For some of the students the act of challenging something from a textbook written by someone that they consider to be much cleverer than themselves is both disturbing and disorienting. In order to teach students how to approach the text I start with a simple discourse analysis of an advertising image in which a scantily-dressed woman is feeding a man some ice-cream. Students are asked to raise their hands if they see the woman as occupying a dominant role (she is seated higher than the man and has control of the ice-cream), subservient role; or a maternal one. Most classes have a mixture of responses which is a perfect introduction to the notion of multiple truths. We all take something from the image but we also bring our discourses to it. Our culture and experiences shape what we see in the picture and there is no single truth that can be taken from the image. There is also little point in arguing with others that our truth is clearly better/more obvious/more rational than theirs. Then we move on to examine potential discourses in a small piece of text which generally the students find much more difficult to grasp.

The module team have to work extremely hard to manage student anxiety around this coursework and have to repeatedly stress that discourse analysis is an invaluable critical thinking tool. I believe that it is extremely useful but presenting it in this way also helps the students to view the approach as a legitimate one and not as something odd that they can then disengage from. They are cautioned against looking too widely for definitions of discourses and discourse analysis as the differing uses of the term in different disciplines can be highly confusing. Vivien Burr's definition in 'Social Constructionism' is the one most frequently used within this context alongside a small selection of web links and some pages from 'Management and Organization' by Linstead, Fulop and Lilley. I also skip lightly over some of Foucault's work during one of the lecture sessions. Students are not expected to become experts in this area but to engage with the activity and to begin to appreciate the possibility of a world of multiple truths with as many ways of understanding as there are people in it.

This is not an easy transition for the students but it also presents some challenges for the teaching staff too. There are ethical issues that have to be managed as students view their final year of study as high risk and teaching something entirely new puts pressures on them that academic staff need to appreciate and manage. As an academic operating within a business school I am also constantly being made aware of the need to consider and address student satisfaction. The National Student Survey (taken by final year undergraduates) impacts upon the way that we can advertise our courses and directly effects how positively we are viewed by the

general public. More directly personally, as an academic working within a business school, if my students express dissatisfaction with my teaching this may have an impact upon any review of my performance and affect my potential for progression.

I believe that those business undergraduates who engage with discourse analysis benefit enormously from the experience. Not only does discourse analysis expand their vocabulary and understanding of the world it can also help them to appreciate the difference between being genuinely open and respectful of the views of others and simply saying that they are. By the time the module draws to a close students regularly approach me to say 'thank you' for the experience. There are also regular comments to suggest that they would have liked to learn about discourses much earlier as they can see the benefits in other coursework. Some even comment on how useful they will find it in terms of understanding and challenging organisational culture and language. I am satisfied that despite the struggles for the academics and students, learning about discourses and discourse analysis helps young people who will soon be moving into graduate positions to be a little more at ease in a complex and uncertain world.

**Biographical Note:** Tina is Deputy Head of the Strategy and Applied Management department at Coventry University.